

## Appendix B: Troubleshooting FAQ

While problems can arise, the beauty of composting (particularly small-scale community composting) is that issues can generally be effectively remedied with a bit of effort and “elbow grease.” The Troubleshooting Table in *Appendix C* provides additional solutions to common problems.

### **Question: What do I do if my pile is not heating up or “cooking”?**

If the pile is not heating up, make changes to create hospitable conditions for microorganisms to thrive. This includes initially using or remixing in a proper ratio of two to three parts by volume browns to one part by volume greens, adding water to maintain an adequately moist system (ideal moisture content is 50 to 60 percent), and turning to fluff materials to create airflow within the pile.

### **Question: My pile stinks. What do I do?**

Maintaining an aerobic (i.e. oxygen-rich) environment helps to avoid unpleasant odors that often arise due to anaerobic (i.e. without oxygen) composting conditions. Composting systems that have too much nitrogen (i.e. C:N ratio is too low), are too wet, have a poor or compacted structure, or are turned too infrequently can have nuisance odors. Rebuild the pile adding more browns, especially bulky materials such as wood chips, and increase turning frequency to get rid of anaerobic pockets. While it is normal for composting to have some odors, proper maintenance prevents the odor from becoming a nuisance.

### **Question: How do I deter rats and other rodents?**

Like most issues, the best way to minimize rat and pest issues is with preventative maintenance. This is achieved through proper management. Promptly handle and process putrescible high-nitrogen materials. They should be mixed with browns immediately and not left to attract pests or go anaerobic. Utilize composting systems that make it extremely difficult for rodents to enter the system, such as a wooden bin system with spaces smaller than the size of a rat’s snout or head (e.g. using 1/4-inch hardware cloth). Systems should be consistently secured (e.g. by

locking lids and sealing any storage containers) and sites kept free of stray food scraps and trash that might attract rodents. Scrupulously incorporate all bits of food that may be around the pile. Control odors to avoid attracting pests. Properly maintain your system and always cover any exposed food scraps with a carbon source (such as wood chips) or finished compost. Piles “sealed” with a uniform depth of at least 6 inches will be of less interest to rodents. Selecting fruit, vegetable, and acceptable food scraps can also minimize rat problems. Rats seek out protein and fats found in unacceptable feedstocks like meats, fish, and oils.

Rodents do not like open spaces as open spaces make them nervous about predators. Consider where the system, storage containers, and curing piles are located. Place these with open space all around. To prevent habitat formation at the base of the composting system, where it’s nice and warm for rodents through the winter, bins ideally should have a barrier (like cement, a dug-out pit with sand, or something else inhospitable).

If your site has pressure from urban rodents, consider keeping browns, curing compost, and finished compost in above-ground tumblers (such as those sold as backyard composting systems).

### **Question: What materials do I need to be careful of composting?**

Err on the side of caution and avoid any questionable material. Meat, cooked food, cheese, and oils can lead to odors that attract rodents. Minimize woods with natural herbicides such as walnut, cypress, cedar, and white oak. Be careful of wood shavings from pressure-treated woods or that might have toxic glues. Avoid grass clippings from lawns treated with herbicides or pesticides.

### **Question: Can I add pet or other animal poop to my pile?**

No. Dog and cat feces can contain parasites and harmful disease organisms. While manures, such as from cows, horses and chickens, are generally acceptable materials to compost, they require extra attention due to the potential for pathogens or negative impact from owners’ use of medications. Manure should only be added to systems with active management and monitoring of temperatures to assure the requirements of the Process for Further Reducing Pathogens have been met. Make

sure to check local regulations about animal manures before including them. Horse manure in particular can be a source of persistent herbicides, which in extremely minute concentrations can contaminate compost.<sup>56</sup>

### **Question: Will composting kill weed seeds?**

Most weed seeds will be killed if pile temperatures reach 140°F for at least three continuous days. Some seeds, like tomato seeds, need temperatures of 153°F. However, to be safe, one can use a solarization process before composting or refrain entirely from including weeds that are in flower or have seed heads. Solarization involves using radiant heat from the sun to kill pests, pathogens, and unwanted seeds. Most simply, this can be achieved by placing the material to be treated in a black plastic trash bag and leaving it in a sunny spot for four to six weeks.

### **Question: How long does it take to produce finished compost?**

While this can vary significantly, composters that maintain optimum conditions in small-scale, community-based composting operations can produce finished compost in approximately 3 to 5 months. Always allocate adequate time for the curing phase in which the compost becomes stable and mature.

### **Question: What do I do about standing water near my pile?**

You don't want standing water on your site. Bins or containers need to sit on a foundation that addresses any "contact water" (water that has come in contact with the active composting process). On cement, for instance, contact water can be spotted and soaked up quickly with wood shavings that are incorporated back into the bin. If a foundation, like bare earth, soaks up contact water, over time it can smell. Do not let "contact" water run off or drain into streams or other surface water.

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<sup>56</sup> For more information on potential problems with persistent herbicides, visit the U.S. Composting Council website at <https://compostingcouncil.org/persistent-herbicides/>